

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-09

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 USIE-00

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2769

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 711

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, XF, SY

SUBJ: SYRIAN "CORRECTION" OF DEBORCHGRAVE INTERVIEW WITH
PRESIDENT ASAD

REF: DAMASCUS 0653 (NOTAL)

1. PAGE ONE BOX ITEM IN DAMASCUS PRESS FEB 26 STATES: QUOTE.
DIRECTOR OF PRESS OFFICE OF PRESIDENCY ANNOUNCES. DAMASCUS.
SYRIAN ARAB NEWS AGENCY. DIRECTOR OF PRESS OFFICE OF
PRESIDENCY HAS ANNOUNCED THE FOLLOWING: PRESIDENT HAFEZ
AL-ASAD MET WITH ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE, EDITOR OF NEWSWEEK
MAGAZINE, ON FRIDAY, FEB 21, AND REVIEWED THE CURRENT
SITUATION IN THE AREA. I WISH TO AFFIRM THAT NEWS MEDIA
REPORTS OF THE MEETING DO NOT FAITHFULLY EXPRESS
WHAT TOOK PLACE IN IT AND ESPECIALLY WITH REGARD TO SUBJECT
OF A PEACE TREATY. END QUOTE.

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2. COMMENT: PRESS DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT STRIKES US AND

THE SYRIANS WE HAVE TALKED TO SINCE ITS ISSUANCE LAST NIGHT AS AWKWARD AND FUZZY "CLARIFICATION" WHICH IS NOT EVEN A DENIAL OF SYRIAN WILLINGNESS TO SIGN PEACE TREATY WITH ISRAEL IF AND WHEN ITS FUNDAMENTAL CONDITIONS HAVE BEEN MET.

IT LEAVES STILL ON THE RECORD ASAD'S POSITIVE STATEMENTS TO DEBORCHGRAVE CONCERNING ENDING OF STATE OF BELLIGERENCY AS BEGINNING STAGE OF REAL PEACE, ACCEPTANCE OF US DEFENSE GUARANTEES FOR ISRAEL AS PART OF FINAL SETTLEMENT AND FORMATION OF PALESTINIAN STATE CONSISTING OF WEST BANK AND GAZA. EXTRACTS OF DEBORCHGRAVE'S INTERVIEW AS THEY APPEARED IN NEWSWEEK CIRCULATED HERE IN BEIRUT'S FRENCH-LANGUAGE L'ORIENT LE JOUR AND ARABIC AN-NAHAR THREE DAYS AGO.

3. WHAT LED TO THIS PARTIAL SYRIAN RETRACTION IS NOT YET CLEAR, BUT FOLLOWING CONSIDERATIONS MIGHT ALL HAVE PLAYED A PART.

(A) ASAD HAD BEGUN CONVERSATION WITH DEBORCHGRAVE AS "OFF THE RECORD". IT WAS ONLY LATER ON THAT DEBORCHGRAVE PERSUADED HIM THAT WHAT HE WAS SAYING SHOULD BE PUBLISHED. UNDER PRESSURE OF TIME, DEBORCHGRAVE ALSO LEFT DAMASCUS IMMEDIATELY AFTER INTERVIEW WITHOUT CLEARING TYPED TEXT WITH PRESIDENCY AS IS HIS USUAL PRACTICE. SOME MISUNDERSTANDING COULD THEREFORE HAVE DEVELOPED AND NOT HAVE BEEN CAUGHT IN TIME.

(B) ASAD MAY HAVE HAD SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT GIVING AWAY A POSSIBLE BARGAINING POINT OUTSIDE THE CONTEXT OF ACTUAL NEGOTIATIONS.

(C) ASAD MAY HAVE FELT HE HAD TALKED TOO MUCH IN NAME OF PALESTINIANS INSTEAD OF DEFERRING AS HE CUSTOMARILY DOES TO THE PLO AS PALESTINIAN SPOKESMAN.

(D) ASAD MAY BE CONCERNED ABOUT IRAQI REACTION AND ANXIOUS TO KEEP IRAQ OUT OF SYRIAN AFFAIRS DURING COMING PERIOD. (SYRIAN BAATH PARTY CONGRESS IS SCHEDULED CONVENE HERE NEXT MONTH.)
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(E) ASAD MAY HAVE FELT HE WAS GETTING OUT IN FRONT OF SADAT WITH THIS SORT OF STATEMENT. HIS NORMAL (AND CAUTIOUS) POLICY HAS BEEN TO FOLLOW BEHIND SADAT ON MATTERS RELATING TO PEACE SETTLEMENT WITH ISRAEL.

(F) FINALLY, IT CANNOT BE OVERLOOKED THAT ASAD MAY SIMPLY HAVE DECIDED THAT HE, HIMSELF, WAS NOT READY TO

SAY HE WOULD SIGN AN EVENTUAL PEACE TREATY WITH ISRAEL.

4. PRESIDENT MADE STEM-WINDER SPEECH AFTERNOON OF FEB 26 TO FEDERATION OF SYRIAN STUDENTS. ON THIS OCCASION HE DREW HIS GREATEST APPLAUSE NEAR END OF SPEECH IN AFFIRMING THAT ONLY PLO CAN ANSWER QUESTION OF "WHAT ARE PALESTINIAN RIGHTS." HE AFFIRMED THAT HE WANTS RETURN OF ALL GOLAN AND ALL SINAI BUT THAT PEACE EVEN THEN WILL NOT BE REALIZED IF PALESTINIANS FAIL TO REGAIN THEIR FULL RIGHTS. CRESCENDO OF APPLAUSE CLIMAXED WITH HIS COMMENT THAT "NEITHER DAMASCUS NOR CAIRO CAN DECIDE ABOUT PALESTINE; ONLY THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE CAN DO THIS." IT IS TEMPTING TO CONCLUDE THAT ASAD USED THIS PLATFORM TO REASSURE PALESTINIAN AND SYRIAN MILITANTS THAT STATEMENTS IN NEWSWEEK INTERVIEW REPRESENTED NO CHANGE IN BASIC SYRIAN POLICY TOWARD ME SETTLEMENT.
MURPHY

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